

Praise from the president is memorable indeed, but former Tuskegee Airman Lt. Col. Charles Lane said receiving the acclaim of his hometown is truly unforgettable.

Lane, 82, of Omaha was one of about 300 Tuskegee Airmen who traveled to Washington, D.C., last month to receive the Congressional Gold Medal from President Bush for their actions in World War II as the country's first black fighter squadron. The gold medal is the highest honor that Congress can bestow upon civilians.

On Thursday, Lane, Lt. Col. Paul Adams of Lincoln, Lt. Col. Harrison Tull of Bellevue and Cpl. Robert Holts of Omaha were the guests of honor at a banquet for 250 in the Doubletree Hotel in downtown Omaha.

"This is the epitome," Lane said. "This is the most special because it's the local identification of our service."

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., and Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., were on hand to present bronze replicas of the medal to the airmen. The gold medal is on display in the Smithsonian Institution.

Lane said he and the others proudly accepted the award on behalf of about 15 Tuskegee Airmen with Nebraska ties. Tuskegee Airmen was the popular name of a group of black pilots who flew with distinction in the 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Forces.

Recognition of the group, which trained at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, began to gain momentum in 1995 with the release of an HBO movie. The pilots were renowned among U.S. bomber crews for their fierce defense of the planes

they were assigned to protect.

"I've been saying for years that we were the best-kept secret of World War II," Lane said. "This medal is proof that we're finally getting the recognition."

Lane said he was especially proud that his group's performance, and that of the all-black 5th Tank Group, gave President Harry Truman leverage after the war to integrate the armed services.

"Although integration was achieved, I still see some of the subtleties (of racism) around today," he said.

Lane said he feels the U.S. Supreme Court's decision last month that public school systems cannot seek to achieve or maintain integration through measures that take explicit account of a student's race is a setback to integration.

"I think it will have a dampening effect on what was started as far as getting rid of the problems that we had," he said. "I see it as a roadblock for future performance by other minorities."

A special guest at the banquet was 12-year-old Austin Wendt of Columbus, Neb. The soon-to-be seventh-grader and a classmate at St. Isidore Catholic School, Nick Pandorf, produced a documentary on the Tuskegee Airmen that placed eighth in a national history competition.

The documentary was shown during the banquet.

